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SUBJECT: ISRAELI DIRECTOR FOR INTER-RELIGIOUS AFFAIRS SEES AGREEMENT
WITH VATICAN IN MONTHS; HOLY SEE SKEPTICAL

REF: Jerusalem 2754

CLASSIFIED BY: Peter Martin, POL, Vatican, State.

REASON: 1.4 (b), (d)

Summary

1. (C) During a recent visit to Rome, Israel's MFA Director for Inter-Religious Affairs Barkan told Charge that agreement in principle on how to resolve the outstanding issues between the Holy See and Israel had been reached in a mid-February negotiating session between the two sides. There were still details to work out, but he expressed confidence that all issues would be resolved within a few months. Barkan attributed the sudden progress to a decision taken by PM Sharon in mid-February to resolve this issue because of the damage it was doing to Israel's image in the U.S. and elsewhere in the "Christian world." Senior Holy See officials welcomed this apparent unblocking of the long-stalled negotiations, but have been privately skeptical that Israel will be able to resolve the issues in this timeframe. End Summary.

Agreement Reached in Principle

2. (C) During a dinner hosted by the Israeli Ambassador in late February, Israeli MFA Director for the Office of Inter-Religious Affairs Nimrod Barkan told Charge that the just-concluded round of negotiations with the Holy See had set the long-stalled talks on fiscal and legal matters on the road to resolution. Barkan asserted that agreement in principle had been reached on "how to resolve the remaining issues." There was still some work ahead to translate these "principles" into final agreements, he said, but he expressed confidence they could be worked out in 3-4 months. Barkan said that in his meetings with senior Vatican officials, including FM-equivalent Lajolo, he assured the Holy See that Israel was committed to bringing the negotiations to closure "to their full satisfaction."

Vatican Wants to Believe

3. (C) Despite Barkan's unrestrained optimism, senior Vatican officials remain much more cautious. "We have heard these promises before," Vatican Assessor Gabriele Caccia told Charge, "and we just don't know what to make of them." He added, "we hope they are true, but experience has taught us not to get our hopes up." Caccia's view was echoed by DFM equivalent Pietro Parolin, who said the late-February talks had seemingly gone well, and that further sessions had been scheduled.

4. (C) The Vatican's chief negotiator, Father David Jaeger, publicly confirmed that there had been "a good atmosphere" at the negotiating sessions, but added that he hoped that this good atmosphere would "be translated effectively in agreed texts." He also noted that he believed "ideas are available for a satisfactory solution" for both sides. Privately, however, Jaeger told Poloff that the Israelis were mounting a full-court public relations campaign to overcome the negative publicity that has built up around their foot-dragging on these talks. He said he had remained positive in the press so as not to undermine his counterparts. Jaeger remains skeptical, however. "It's one thing to say these things in the press, but another to bring a piece of paper to the table," he said. He remains hopeful that the desire to get out from under the negative publicity will be enough to push the Israeli ministries involved to the needed compromises.

Sharon's Marching Orders

5. (C) When Charge noted to Barkan the Holy See's skepticism, Barkan and Israeli Ambassador Ben-Hur acknowledged that the Holy See had reason to be skeptical in the past. He pointed out that the taxation and legal issues have implications for all other religious groups in Israel, adding that the way in which Israel resolves these issues with the Holy See will be seen as a

precedent by other religious groups, including Jewish groups. For that reason, a number of ministries concerned had dug in their heels and refused to move. In mid-February, however, Barkan said PM Sharon told his cabinet he wanted to get this issue behind him, because it was not worth "antagonizing the Christian world." This decision had generated instructions to

the negotiators that the Israelis believe will lead to agreement in the coming months.

Comment

16. (C) The Holy See has been aggressively pressing its case to resolve the final issues relating to the 1993 Fundamental Agreement over the past year, raising its concerns in meetings with the President, Vice-President, and Secretary, and engaging the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops to generate congressional and public pressure. The Holy See is deeply concerned for the future of Christians in the Holy Land, and believes the continuing problems on immigration, pastoral care, schools, taxes and property have made life difficult for the remaining Christians, weakening the Christian presence in the region. They believe that only forceful U.S. engagement will lead to a resolution, and will want to pull out all the stops to keep the pressure on now that an agreement seems to be within reach.

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